

Castillo sworn in to 2nd Term as Superintendent of Public Instruction

by Bend Weekly News Sources

State Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo was sworn in Tuesday to her second term as Superintendent of Public Instruction in a ceremony in the Senate Chamber in the State Capitol Building in Salem. She was introduced by Natalie Caceres of Lakeridge High School, student advisor to the State Board of Education. Chief Justice Paul DeMuniz delivered the oath of office. Commissioner of Labor and Industries, Dan Gardner, was also sworn in at the event.

Superintendent Castillo made the following comments at the ceremony:

“Oregon is waking up to a new day. We are beginning 2007 with a new sense of hope and optimism, buoyed by a state budget that invests in our state’s future, from health care to public safety to higher education -- and of course, our public schools. When I first came to this office four years ago it was a very different story. Oregon was hurting and our schools were reeling -- schools were slashing positions and programs, cutting school days, and class sizes were going up and up.

I don’t wish hard times on anyone, and I hope we never see days like those again! but that kind of adversity has a way of sharpening your perspective. Today, I believe that our schools are smarter, tougher, more efficient and more focused on getting the job done for students. And I believe that the Department of Education has gotten smarter too. We have become a powerful force for change and accountability, making a positive impact on this state’s 560-thousand schoolchildren and their schools, school districts and Education Service Districts.

Today, as I look forward to the next four years, to the work that needs to be completed, to the work that needs to get started -- I can’t help but feel optimistic. We’re in a far better place today than we were just four years ago, and here’s why --

We’re seeing student performance in reading, writing, math and science rising -- slowly, but surely. We’re not where we want to be, where we need to be -- but the trends are overwhelmingly positive. We can confidently state that we are closing the achievement gap. In Oregon today, 1 of every 2 students comes from a low-income family and 1 in 4 comes from a minority group. While assessment scores are going up across the board, they are rising at a faster clip for our children from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

We still have work to do, and we still have many children who are not achieving at the level of their classmates, but we’re making progress here in Oregon even under these very difficult budget years.

Every spring, I host the Celebrating Student Success Awards -- to recognize and spread the word about schools across this state that are making a difference in closing the gap and to send a message that this is a top priority. A lot of work goes into raising student achievement, but I believe a major factor has been our outstanding commitment to literacy here in Oregon. If children can't read, they're not going to get anywhere in any other subjects.

I am a big believer in the idea that every teacher needs to be equipped with strong literacy skills, whether they teach math or history or art. That's why we host an annual summer institute for middle and high school teachers, where they get exposed to nationally recognized educators and researchers and learn about all the best, latest strategies for boosting reading in the classroom. Because of this, Oregon is emerging as a national leader in adolescent literacy.

When I visit successful schools, be they in Hillsboro or Medford or Fossil, I find that they share three key factors -- They have tough, smart principals in charge. They have phenomenally talented, dedicated teachers working in teams and using data. Finally, they count on strong support from parents and community. We are committed to leadership development, to teacher mentoring, and to community/school partnerships. We are training principals to be successful with the state's growing diversity, or giving novice teachers guidance as they start out their careers, or supporting initiatives that get volunteers reading with first graders or that put laptops in the hands of middle school kids.

We have a lot of excellent work underway. And while I feel very good about the budget, I am still going to be nudging our legislators to raise that final dollar amount for schools to 6-point-3 billion -- I'm actually hoping for more than that. Here's why: We have a wonderful opportunity to move forward. Yes, there are programs lost that should be restored as we start reinvesting in our schools. But we cannot simply go back to the old way of doing business. We've come too far to do that.

We owe it to the children of this state, and to the taxpayers, to move forward with a fresh perspective.

I am a firm believer in the importance of getting children off to a strong start in school. All the scientific research tells us that the early years -- birth to 5 -- are absolutely critical to brain development. They're learning to learn. There's no better investment in the future than early childhood education, and every dollar we spend on children when they're 3, 4, and 5 years old is money that's going to generate a phenomenal return. But in Oregon, our Head Start preschool programs are forced to turn away hundreds of low-income families because they don't have enough spots for everyone who qualifies. And though we know that full-day kindergarten is key to getting kids off to a strong start, the majority of elementary schools can't afford anything more than half-day programs.

When the David Douglas District in Portland recently switched to full-day kindergarten, the number of at-risk children meeting benchmarks more than doubled the next year! When we saw that Crooked River Elementary in Prineville was seeing math and reading scores going up and up, we asked why and the principal there said a key reason was their switch to full-day kindergarten.

Early childhood education works, and that's why the Governor's proposed school budget includes money to make Head Start available to all families who qualify. I will work with the legislature to earmark any additional funds to expand all our kindergartens in this state from half- to full-days. I predict we'll see some rewards for this investment right away. But the real payoff will be down the line, as these kids move through the grades, and we see rising achievement in our middle and high schools. Head Start and Kindergarten are like planting the seeds for better middle and high schools.

Speaking of high schools, let me talk a bit about the work we have going on there. The hard truth is that we are not doing a good enough job of preparing graduates for the future. For a decade now, Oregon has had the CIM and CAM system in place. I applaud the effort to raise standards through those certificates, but the fact of the matter is only about 1 in 3 graduates bothers to earn a CIM. When they go out into the world, colleges and employers don't ask about them, and they're not required for students, for colleges, for employers, for anyone.

So we are moving beyond that system, taking the best of what we currently have and designing a new and exciting high school diploma -- A diploma that stands for academic excellence, that builds more rigor and relevance into the high school experience, so that our graduates are better prepared for college, careers, and citizenship. We no longer are going to pursue high levels of achievement for some. We want that attainment for all students. It is simple and sensible -- and when a student graduates they will be ready for the challenges of the global economy.

We all know we are living in a world undergoing change at a rapid pace. Advances in communications are making the world smaller, making competition more intense, transforming how we live and do business. Who knows what the next 5, 10, 50 years hold in store? America's future is going to depend on having the very best schools producing the very best graduates who can out-think and out-work the competition. With more jobs demanding high-level skills, we need to get more students ready. Two-thirds of all jobs today require education and training beyond high school, making it essential that graduates be better prepared to succeed in careers and life. And for the graduates who go to college, too many take remedial classes. Of course, not all graduates are going to attend college. But they will get better jobs and have more opportunities with a rock-solid educational foundation and strong skills in communication, creative and critical thinking, and teamwork.

Oregon cannot afford to delay. We're already behind. Twenty states have raised graduation standards. Another dozen are in the process of doing the same.

We are listening hard to what schools are telling us about the changes we are proposing. We'll keep on listening and talking, too, as we put together the details in the months to come. Later this month, the State Board of Education will take action, to set the course as we move forward on this initiative. I want to commend state board members and the Governor for their leadership on this very important work.

I know that these changes are challenging. However, I have complete faith that working together we will create a system that works for our schools, our teachers, and most importantly for our students and their futures. We will plan together for a successful implementation. Will the work be difficult? Yes. Will there be some stress and anxiety? Of course. But if we do this right, I believe we will make a tremendous impact for a generation to come.

So here I am today, standing on the brink of a period of unprecedented reinvestment in education. Here is my pledge to Oregon.

If we invest in preschool and full-day kindergarten—If we take the initiative to raise the bar for our high schools and give them the support needed . . . If we set high expectations and high standards for our kids and sustain our commitment to them all the way through elementary and middle and high school --

Then we can turn our sights to the goal that every student will succeed. Every student will graduate well-prepared.

As I join the national voice for moving beyond the goals of No Child Left Behind to Every Student a Graduate, I want Oregon to focus on making that dream come true. Now, some will say that’s just impossible. I’ve had some of my own advisors caution me about setting such a lofty goal. But I am taking a tip from the many excellent teachers I get to meet as I visit schools around the state. They don’t make excuses for underachievement. They believe their kids can achieve excellence and their kids come to believe it, too. And when you believe, great things happen.

We have work to do, and I promise the Oregon Department of Education will do its part. I’ll keep using my bully pulpit to push for higher standards, for greater accountability. We’ll keep on providing the data, support, training and guidance our schools need.

To Oregon’s school leaders -- work with us. Embrace the spirit of change and innovation as we move forward.

To Oregon’s business leaders -- join us. Get ready to get more involved, to get more engaged in education.

To Oregon’s teachers -- inspire us. Stay focused on the kids, and never lose touch with the reasons you got into teaching.

To Oregon's legislators -- support us. Let's get a strong school budget passed quickly so we can get started on everything we need to do. Let's approve the ODE budget so we can provide the leadership we need to deliver.

To Oregon's students and their families -- work together to do your very best. A better, brighter future for Oregon starts with you.

And right here, right now, Oregon can wake to a new day with the renewed commitment to ensure that every student, every day will be a success.

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